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ABSTRACT

Eleven upper division psychology majors and two junior college personnel were enrolled at Fort Hays Kansas State College in a two-week, full participation practicum held at Larned State Hospital. A major feature of the program was the early opportunity for intensive sampling of occupational role behaviors and reinforcers in an institutional environment. Students were free to explore typical role behaviors of the institution psychologists, their relations with other professional and para-professional workers, the treatment programs of the hospital, and its organizational structure. One goal was to induce changes in behavior relevant to the student's perception of state hospitals, both as social institutions and as occupational settings. The program is evaluated: (1) in relation to two programs of a similar nature; and (2) in terms of the behavioral indicators that its goals, at least for some participants, were achieved. (Author)

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A TWO-WEEK PRACTICUM IN APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

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College students' demands for "relevance" and society's need for recruitment in the service professions are among the several pressing issues of the day. Although many of us raise these issues, we are not all equally inclined or in the best position to do something about them. When there is an opportunity, however, to effect a program responsive to two such issues, it should be difficult to avoid.

That seemed to be the case at Fort Hays Kansas State College in January, 1971. The report of a previous undergraduate practicum in applied psychology (Young & Harris, 1969) had suggested a course that might suitably be offered during a two-week intersession period, intended for educational innovations. The response to the catalog listing (Psych. 260, Practicum in Applied (Clinical) Psychology, 2 cr. hrs.) was encouraging. Eleven undergraduates from Kansas colleges and universities, and two junior college staff members with advanced degrees enrolled in the practicum, hosted by Larned State Hospital.

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Goals and their Implementation

One major purpose of the course was to provide an opportunity for the undergraduate to intensively experience the role behaviors and expectations, and interdisciplinary relations of the state hospital psychologist or allied professional. A second goal was

to allow the student to explore the range of treatment programs and study the organizational structure of such facilities. Finally, it was hoped that the experience would have a positive effect on students' attitudes toward state hospitals, as social institutions and as occupational settings.

In order to implement the major goals of the course, from one to three students were assigned to each of several units: Alcoholic Treatment, Vocational Rehabilitation, Adolescent Treatment, or a hospital living unit. Assignments were made on the basis of student interests, student requests for loose or close supervision, and the need for an even distribution of students among the available units. Within each unit, students were assigned to work under the supervision, in most cases, of a staff psychologist. In one case, a sociology major was assigned to work under the supervision of a member of the Social Service Department.

Enactment of Roles and Sampling of Programs

One major goal of the course was to allow the student to intensively enact psychological roles. Since the actual performance of professional behaviors was left largely to the student and his individual supervisor, the degree of that involvement varied considerably. There were some students who found themselves primarily observers of their unit's activities. At the other extreme, some students were given specific assignments such as the psychological evaluation of a newly admitted patient, and presentation of their report at a staff meeting.

The extent to which students sampled available hospital programs was also variable, although not so much as a function of

supervisor characteristics. Students' activities were not confined, necessarily, to their own units. Instead, they were relatively free to sample specialized programs in areas to which they had not been assigned. One example of a program which attracted considerable cross-unit sampling was the Alcoholic Unit's "hotseat": a therapy approach which matches a patient's self-evaluation against the evaluation of his fellows on the hospital ward. Its attractiveness was probably related to its dramatic title and the relatively concrete techniques which it employs.

The possible range of professional behaviors and hospital programs which could be sampled was very broad indeed. All students, for example, had the opportunity for close interaction with one or more hospital patients, especially the one that they selected as the subject of their case study. Their journal notations gave ample evidence that students experienced many of the emotions and frustrations felt by most professional workers in such situations. There were also indications that some students recognized the necessity for evaluating the validity of the verbal reports of their "clients". This was illustrated by one student, commenting on his interviews with an adolescent girl in which she told him of her many sexual exploits. At first, he reported, he tended to believe her, but later, "I figured she was just trying to sound big and get attention."

In addition to close personal contacts with hospital patients, the students were exposed to a wide variety of group evaluation or treatment situations involving themselves, one or more patients, and one or more staff members. These experiences ranged from

participating in an intake evaluation interview with a patient and the unit psychologist, to serving as a co-therapist in group therapy.

A third type of professional activity involved the students in group activities where only staff members were present. These ranged from the staff meetings which began each work day on some of the treatment units, to the weekly meetings of the hospital's Department of Psychology. Here the students learned of the frustrations and rewards which can result from the application of group action to the administrations of complex social units, or to other problem-solving functions. One student was particularly intrigued by the group process at work. At the end of the first day on his assigned unit he noted the roles which had been taken by various group members, and resolved to learn more of the theory and research related to group interaction.

Examination of Course Requirements

Three course requirements included the writing of a case study on a selected hospital patient, the student's attendance at semi-weekly class meetings, and the making of daily entries in a journal. In spite of knowing that grades would not be based on their performance, students performed these required activities with more dispatch and enthusiasm than is often observed in the conventional academic course. Indeed, with respect to the case study, the absence of the usual grading system influenced the speed with which they were read and returned by the instructor more than it did the speed with which they were written and turned in by the students.

Case Study

Although the operations involved in the writing of the case study were the usual professional activities of information gathering, organization, and integration, it was clear that for some of the students the assignment took on more personal implications. Evidence from the journal reports of several students indicated that they felt quite personally involved with the present problems and the future disposition of their case study subject. This was illustrated by the comments of one student who discussed his interviews with his subject (an adolescent girl) especially well in his journal. He described the pleasure that he experienced at being able to establish good rapport, and expressed his hope that she could finish high school and perhaps enter college if she felt she could handle it. In spite of his concern, however, the notation from that same student quoted on page 3 indicated his realization of the difficulties standing in the way of accurate and meaningful communication.

Class meeting

The major contributions of the instructor were in reading and responding to students' journal entries, and in leading the class meetings held twice weekly during the two week period. The meetings had a "cognitive" rather than a "group therapy" orientation, providing an opportunity for students to discuss with each other some of the highlights of their practicum experience. They also provided an atmosphere where topics could be discussed which might have been inhibited in the presence of hospital staff members. The instructor frequently drew on his own work experience in state hospitals in order to provide perspective to the observations of the students.

Especially worthy of notice were the apparent changes in enthusiasm, interest and mood during the course of the meetings: changes which seemed to parallel characteristic affective and attitudinal changes which occur during the first few weeks of state hospital employment. The average new employee begins with high hopes that he will make an effective contribution to the therapeutic milieu, and is eager to apply techniques and theories which he may have learned in a prior training program. Following that, he often responds with mild depression, dismay at the various ways in which his excellent efforts can be negated, and disappointment that his newly learned techniques seemed less effective than he had expected. Ideally, a third stage is reached where the new employee rebuilds his system of theory and practice to better fit his own experience, and resolves to make whatever contribution he can by learning how to work within, or sometimes around, the system.

Similar changes seemed to occur with many of the students in the practicum, according to observations made during the class meetings. At the first meeting, on Wednesday of the first week, the students expressed delight that they had been made to feel so welcome on the unit to which they had been assigned. This "anxiety relief" response seemed to prevail, even over the annoyance that some had expressed (but only in their journals) when an unforeseen delay prevented their assignment to units as quickly as they had hoped. The optimistic mood continued throughout the first week, maintained in part, perhaps, by the novelty of their first exposure to the hospital programs. By Wednesday of the second week, however, the instructor was struck by the relatively low rate of interaction and verbalization which occurred during the group meeting. When

he commented on it, one student replied that "reality had set in". By Friday, the last day of the practicum, the mood was again predominantly optimistic as the students summarized and integrated their total practicum experience.

Journal

Private attitudes and personal feelings which went unexpressed during the meetings, instead appeared as private communications to the instructor through journal notations. This was shown in several ways by journal entries. The students' annoyance with the first day's delay was not mentioned at all at the first group meeting, but several students wrote journal notations about it. On another occasion one student aroused some resentment when he brought up with a hospital employee a matter of unit policy on which students had been critical. Their resentment was noted by at least two students in their journals, but not at all in the group.

As must be evident by now, the journal served as a valuable source of information about the program from the student's point of view. The instructor also found journal entries to be excellent sources of data about the student's initial attitudes toward the practicum experience. Facilitating attitudes could be encouraged with positive feedback, while those which threatened to interfere with the experience could be criticized, and alternatives could be offered.

Evaluation

In relation to other programs of a similar nature. This practicum was quite similar, of course, to the program described by Young and Harris (1969), which inspired it. Major differences between

them were in length of time (two weeks versus four), the degree of personal involvement of the instructor (moderate versus intensive), and in the orientation of the class meetings (cognitive versus group therapy).

There is little reason to doubt that differences between them with respect to the orientation of class meetings and involvement of the instructors were largely determined by personal orientations of the instructors. In addition, however, length of time might itself be an important variable influencing the choice of group orientations. With a longer session and more frequent meetings, it might be easier to develop group interaction in ways which follow the progression observed by Young and Harris (testing-hostility-sharing-insight).

Those planning similar practica might also note the apparent relationship reported here between group orientation and students' use of journals as the repository of negative or otherwise private feelings of group members about each other. From the observations made here it would appear that when the group orientation does not emphasize the free expression of interpersonal responses among group members, the journal takes on added importance as a practicum requirement.

Another similar program has been described by Lunneborg (1970) at the University of Washington. Instead of being limited to one institution, 41 social service agencies were located in the Seattle metropolitan area where students could do field work for 1-3 hours of academic credit. Instead of working full time at an agency during an academic period, students could work at the rate of four weekly

hours of field work for each credit hour earned. Although the present program could not be expanded to the extent suggested by Lunneborg, it would seem desirable to offer an alternative undergraduate practicum at a community mental health center. This was urged especially by one student who felt that it would provide a more realistic impression of the variety of service settings in which clinical psychologists work.

In relation to changed attitudes and perceptions. There was considerable evidence from both linguistic and other behavioral data sources that important changes took place in students' perceptions and attitudes. One student's journal entries, in particular, showed that his attitude toward his assigned unit became more positive as the practicum progressed. Admittedly beginning his assignment with the intention of "dragon-slaying", he later found himself somewhat humbled by the difficulty he had in providing better alternatives to what the ward was already doing. As his attitude became more positive, his journal entries appeared to be less critical of ward activities. A final journal entry indicated that unit staff members had also noticed that his attitude had changed.

Another student had been critical of what he thought was a lack of concern for the patients on the part of staff members. Toward the end of the second week his comments on a staff meeting indicated that he "finally felt they were showing some concern for the patients." He quite realistically added that, "it would help if I was around longer and could see if my attitudes over time would change...maybe it's just 'cause I'm new at the game--I hope not."

There were more direct behavioral indicators that the practicum experience helped to elicit approach responses toward hospital programs at times when students were not necessarily under the control of practicum expectations. One student, for example, took part of his own time on the weekend to return to his assigned hospital unit, in order to become better acquainted with the patients. Perhaps most encouraging were the steps taken by one student to determine whether or not they could continue their work on a volunteer basis after the practicum was over. These objective behavioral indications of the generalization of approach responses to the practicum setting provide perhaps the most convincing evidence for the value of the undergraduate practicum in a field setting.

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